

AMENDED IN ASSEMBLY MARCH 19, 1998

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CALIFORNIA LEGISLATURE—1997–98 REGULAR SESSION

Assembly Joint Resolution

No. 52

Introduced by Assembly Member Wright

**(Principal coauthors: Assembly Members Vincent, Murray,
Aroner, and Washington)**

(Principal coauthors: Senators Hughes, Lee, and Watson)

**(Coauthors: Assembly Members Alquist, Bowen, Cardenas,
Gallegos, Hertzberg, Honda, Keeley, Knox, Napolitano,
Perata, Takasugi, and ~~Torlakson~~ Torlakson, Ackerman,
Aguiar, Alby, Ashburn, Baca, Battin, Baugh, Bordonaro,
Bowler, Bustamante, Campbell, Cardoza, Cedillo,
Cunneen, Davis, Ducheny, Escutia, Figueroa, Firestone,
Floyd, Frusetta, Goldsmith, Granlund, Havice, House,
Kaloogian, Kuehl, Kuykendall, Lempert, Leonard,
Machado, Margett, Mazzoni, McClintock, Migden, Miller,
Morrissey, Olberg, Oller, Ortiz, Papan, Poochigian, Prenter,
Pringle, Richter, Runner, Scott, Shelley, Strom-Martin,
Sweeney, Thompson, Thomson, Villaraigosa, Wayne,
Wildman, and Woods)**

February 20, 1998

Assembly Joint Resolution No. 52—Relative to the Port
Chicago disaster.

LEGISLATIVE COUNSEL'S DIGEST

AJR 52, as amended, R. Wright. Port Chicago disaster.

This measure would memorialize Congress and the President of the United States to act to vindicate the sailors unjustly blamed for, and the sailors convicted of mutiny following, the Port Chicago disaster, and to rectify any mistreatment by the military of those sailors.

Fiscal committee: no.

1 WHEREAS, On the night of July 17, 1944, two transport
2 vessels loading ammunition at the Port Chicago naval
3 base on the Sacramento River in California were
4 suddenly engulfed in a gigantic explosion, the incredible
5 blast of which wrecked the naval base and heavily
6 damaged the town of Port Chicago, located 1.5 miles
7 away; and

8 WHEREAS, Everyone on the pier and aboard the two
9 ships was killed instantly—some 320 American naval
10 personnel, 200 of whom were Black enlisted men; and
11 another 390 military and civilian personnel were injured,
12 including 226 Black enlisted men; and

13 WHEREAS, The two ships and the large loading pier
14 were totally annihilated and an estimated \$12,000,000 in
15 property damage was caused by the huge blast; and

16 WHEREAS, This single, stunning disaster accounted
17 for nearly one-fifth of all Black naval casualties during the
18 whole of World War II; and

19 WHEREAS, The specific cause of the explosion was
20 never officially established by a Court of Inquiry, in effect
21 clearing the officers-in-charge of any responsibility for
22 the disaster and insofar as any human cause was invoked,
23 laid the burden of blame on the shoulders of the Black
24 enlisted men who died in the explosion; and

25 WHEREAS, Following the incident, many of the
26 surviving Black sailors were transferred to nearby Camp
27 Shoemaker where they remained until July 31, when two
28 of the divisions were transferred to naval barracks in
29 Vallejo near Mare Island; another division, which was also
30 at Camp Shoemaker until July 31, returned to Port
31 Chicago to help with the cleaning up and rebuilding of
32 the base; and

1 WHEREAS, Many of these men were in a state of shock,
2 troubled by the vivid memory of the horrible explosion;
3 however, they were provided no psychiatric counseling
4 or medical screening, except for those who were
5 obviously physically injured; none of the men, even those
6 who had been hospitalized with injuries, was granted
7 survivor leaves to visit their families before being
8 reassigned to regular duties; and none of these survivors
9 was called to testify at the Court of Inquiry; and

10 WHEREAS, Captain Merrill T. Kline,
11 Officer-in-Charge of Port Chicago, issued a statement
12 praising the African American enlisted men and stating
13 that “the men displayed creditable coolness and bravery
14 under those emergency conditions”; and

15 WHEREAS, After the disaster, white sailors were given
16 30 days’ leave to visit their families—according to
17 survivors, this was the standard for soldiers involved in a
18 disaster—while only African American sailors were
19 ordered back to work the next day to clean and remove
20 human remains; and

21 WHEREAS, After the disaster, the preparation of Mare
22 Island for the arrival of African American sailors included
23 moving the barracks of white sailors away from the
24 loading area in order to be clear of the ships being loaded
25 in case of another explosion; and

26 WHEREAS, The survivors and new personnel who
27 later were ordered to return to loading ammunition
28 expressed their opposition, citing the possibility of
29 another explosion; the first confrontation occurred on
30 August 9 when 328 men from three divisions were
31 ordered out to the loading pier; the great majority of the
32 men balked, and eventually 258 were arrested and
33 confined for three days on a large barge tiered to the pier;
34 and

35 WHEREAS, Fifty of these men were selected as the
36 ring-leaders and charged with mutiny, and on October 24,
37 1944, after only 80 minutes of a military court, all 50 men
38 were found guilty of mutiny—10 were sentenced to 15
39 years in prison, 24 sentenced to 12 years, 11 sentenced to

1 10 years, and five sentenced to eight years; and all were
2 to be dishonorably discharged from the Navy; and

3 WHEREAS, After a massive outcry the next year, in
4 January 1946, 47 of the Port Chicago men were released
5 from prison and “exiled” for one year overseas before
6 returning to their families; and

7 WHEREAS, In a 1994 investigation, the United States
8 Navy stated that “there is no doubt that racial prejudice
9 was responsible for the posting of only African American
10 enlisted personnel to loading divisions at Port Chicago”;
11 and

12 WHEREAS, In the 1994 investigation, the United States
13 Navy, prompted by Members of Congress, admitted that
14 the routine assignment of only African American enlisted
15 personnel to manual labor was clearly motivated by race;
16 now, therefore, be it

17 *Resolved by the Senate and the Assembly of the State*
18 *of California, jointly,* That the Legislature of the State of
19 California respectfully memorializes the Congress and
20 the President of the United States to act to vindicate the
21 sailors unjustly blamed for, and the sailors convicted of
22 mutiny following, the Port Chicago disaster, and to rectify
23 any mistreatment by the military of those sailors; and be
24 it further

25 *Resolved,* That the Secretary of the Senate transmit
26 copies of this resolution to the President and Vice
27 President of the United States, the Speaker of the House
28 of Representatives, and each Senator and Representative
29 from California in the Congress of the United States.

